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ABSTRACT

Noting the centrality of the competence construct in current pedagogical practices and basic communication course design, this paper questions assumptions about how communication is taught and assessed in the classroom. The paper begins by addressing disagreements on communication competence, focusing on normative measures of communication competence, communication competence and the "other" person, communication competence and the speaker, and cognitive communication competence. The paper then discusses the action and reaction approaches to communication competence, competence as a set of communication skills, competence as achieving goals, competence as appropriateness, a transactional approach to competence, and implications for the basic communication course. The paper then addresses the "Competent Speaker" form specifically, offering criticism of the form concerning its ability to discriminate levels of competence, the generalizations from the teacher's point of view to the audience as a whole, and the cultural narrowness of the competencies. The paper concludes that communication educators can, and should (1) profess to teach a knowledge base that can help students make informed analyses and judgements about their past, present, and future communication interactions; (2) teach skills that students can use in a variety of communication contexts; and (3) discuss and demonstrate communication strategies that might be helpful in future interactions. Contains 59 references. (RS)

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A REACTION TO THE "COMPETENT SPEAKER SPEECH EVALUATION FORM": An Update

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Dr. Hugenberg is Professor of Communication at Youngstown State University and is a former chair of the Basic Course Committees of the Speech Communication Association and the Central States Communication Association. Dr. Yoder is Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Dayton and is currently chair of the Basic Course Commission of the Speech Communication Association. Both authors are currently directors of basic courses at their respective universities. This paper is an update, for the purposes of debate, of a paper originally presented during the Eastern Communication Association convention, Washington, D.C. and published in the Basic Communication Annual 5, (1993), pp. 247-260. It is also incorporating ideas from "Myth-Conceptions About Communication Competence: A Transactional Approach," a paper presented during the Central States Communication Association convention, Indianapolis, IN. Drs. Hugenberg and Yoder were both authors of these manuscripts.

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A REACTION TO THE "COMPETENT SPEAKER SPEECH EVALUATION FORM": An Update

During the 1992 SCA Convention, the "Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form" was distributed to participants during a Short Course (Morreale, *et al.*, 1992) and printed in a collection of essays on communication assessment (Morreale, 1994). Other evaluation forms such as the CAAI form (Rubin, 1982; 1985) reflect ongoing efforts to define and measure communication competence. Morreale, *et al.* (1992) concluded that "communication competence has become the significant referent with respect to the goal of communication instruction" (p. 23). Morreale (1994) concluded, "Considering the acknowledged importance of oral communication competency and the interest in it displayed by scholars and educators, a need existed to base instruction and assessment on a standardized and tested approach to public speaking" (p. 220). Indeed, most assessments of basic communication courses include evaluating students' communication competence as a measure of course effectiveness. The problem with all this is the belief that we can teach communication competence in one course. Perhaps even a more basic problem is the assumption held that taking a communication course can render students "competent". However, the centrality of the competence construct in current pedagogical practices and course design is undeniable.

Disagreement on Communication Competence

Scholars seem to be in considerable disagreement concerning the definition of competence, its theoretical foundations, its behavioral manifestations, and its measurement. For example, some definitions focus on knowledge as the essential requirement for competence (McCroskey, 1982). Few scholars dispute the obvious connection between knowing what to do and communication competence. Other scholars require the performance of communication skills (Bochner and Kelly, 1974; Buerkel-Rothfuss, Gray, and Yerby, 1993). Pavitt and Haight (1986), Duran (1983), Duran and Spitzberg (1995), and others require competent communicators to be able to adapt to differing social constraints and meet other's expectations. No one suggests the strong connection between communication skills and communication competence. The importance here is not to confuse the means, communication skills, with the end, communication competence. Some scholars suggest that competent communicators must be able to formalize and achieve communication goals (Wiemann, 1977a). Attaining goals is important for all participants in a communication transaction. We cannot fall into the trap of emphasizing speaker skills over listener skills, or visa versa. Most writers combine one or more of these criteria (Rubin 1982; Spitzberg, 1983; Rosenfeld and Berko, 1990).

Normative Measures of Communication Competence. Still other definitions assume competence is the performance of specific

skills (Bochner and Kelly, 1974; Buerkel-Rothfuss, Gray, and Yerby, 1993). Cegala and Waldron (1992) suggest, for example, that two communicators could mutually assess each other's communication as competent regardless of the quality of their communication as assessed by observers. They state, "One can easily imagine numerous scenarios in which such an interaction would not meet even the minimum requirements of normative expectations for competent communication" (106). The implication is that there is a set of expected behaviors that constitute competent communication and only those people who perform those behaviors at an appropriate level of quality can be deemed competent. This suggests that the people involved in the communication interaction are least qualified or able to judge their own competence and that there is only one standard of behavior applicable to a given situation.

A myriad of measuring instruments for competence have been formulated based on assessing normative levels of skill performance (DeWitt, *et al.*, 1991; Hays, 1992; Goulden, 1992; Aitken & Neer, 1992; Rubin, 1985). In all cases, the sets of skills vary among measuring instruments, qualitative criteria are ambiguous judgments by "experts", and the method of measurement is arbitrary and idiosyncratic to the researcher.

The key variable missing in the "skills perspective" on competence is the assessment by the communicators themselves. The history of the relationship, the normative meanings and practices developed during the course of the relationship, and cultural

idiosyncrasies of the participants are virtually ignored by the instruments. Each skills assessment instrument assumes that "society" has an established set of normative skills that a good communicator must do and that those skills are continuous variables measurable in both quantity and quality. The skills approach seems based on the assumption that skills are generalizable across contexts, people, and cultures. Yet most educators and researchers simultaneously espouse the assumption that meanings are in people, that rules for behavior are idiosyncratically defined by the specific relationships, and that no two communication situations are identical. A static assessment of skills does not seem consistent with the process notion of communication.

Communication Competence and the "Other" Person. Wiemann (1977b) suggests that competence involves accomplishing personal goals while "saving the other's face." Others suggest that competence requires helping others to reach their goals (Pavitt & Haight, 1986; Duran, 1983). While sensitivity to others seems a reasonable societal ethic, there is no research or theoretical basis for including this requirement in competence assessment. Indeed, such a supposition would cast any disparaging comment, hurtful criticism, or unkind remark as incompetent communication. Yet it is easy to imagine a variety of situations when criticism which initially hurts someone's feelings or impedes goal attainment may be the only sane and socially acceptable course of action (such as parents disciplining and protecting children,

teachers correcting students, therapists breaking down patients' barriers, etc.). it would also suggest that competitive behaviors are by definition incompetent since they seek to attain self-goals while interfering with achievement of the other's goals.

This approach is also problematic because competence assessment turns focus from the speaker (sender) to the listener (receiver). Ascertaining competence requires looking not at the intentions of the speaker, but at the meaning given to the message by the receiver. This is one of the problems with the **Competent Speaker Form**. The form judges permits judgments about a speaker's competence *from the perspective of only one listener -- the instructor*. A speaker's skills do not, by definition, result in communication competence or shared meaning with an audience. Communication competence does not exist in isolation; and what makes a person's communication skills "competent" also depends on other elements of the context. Skills are not competent in isolation of these other elements. A speaker's otherwise well-intentioned remark (competent) may be perceived as cruel criticism by the receiver and hence the speaker becomes incompetent. All other criteria for competence seem to rely solely on assessing the speaker's behaviors. If we now judge competence from the receiver's reaction, then competence is not under the control of the speaker or even a characteristic of the speaker. To reestablish focus on the speaker, we could modify the criteria to only require "attempts to save the other's face"; and this is not what we do. However, competence would no longer be

"goal achievement" or "behavioral performance" but simply "intentions"; i.e., a speaker is competent if she or he intends or attempts the correct behavior, regardless of actual effects or outcomes. In either case, the criteria of "sensitivity to others" becomes problematic.

Communication Competence and the Speaker. The term "communicator competence" suggests that each person can be judged competent apart from the others' behaviors. Further, communicator competence assumes that competence is a trait of the individual; i.e., a person is more or less competent across all or similar contexts. Many of the dimensions of competence suggested by researchers have few behavioral referents and are most often operationalized as trait measures (Cegala & Waldron, 1992; Spitzberg 1991 & 1986; Wiemann and Backlund, 1980).

The assumptions of this approach seems to be that behaviors can be assessed in isolation of others' behavior and interpretations. Thus, competence can be ascertained by third party observers (e.g., teachers) without regard for the interpretations of the listener, the unstated knowledge and assumptions of the communication interactants, or the adaptation of the interactants to each other. Competence, therefore, is simply a matter of matching performed behavior to a pre-existing template of desired communication skills to determine the level of isomorphism with an external observer's expectations.

The limitations of this approach become obvious when judging a public speaking performance. For example, an audience of 100

people listen to a speaker. Half of them think the speaker is competent and the other half think the speaker is incompetent. Half of the people are persuaded (or informed or entertained) the other half is not. Is the speaker competent? Incompetent? Moderately competent? Is competence an aggregate of the ratings? Or is it a majority opinion?

In most classroom scenarios, the teacher is the sole (or at least the primary) determinant of student communication competence. The grade given on speech performances, tests, and written assignments are the teacher's judgment of the student's skills and knowledge and the sole basis for determining a student's competence (Hay, 1990). Yet a different teacher observing the exact same student behavior might judge the student differently. Has the student's competence changed? The assumption is that competence is a trait or characteristic of one person denies the influence of others in the communication process and the perceptions, biases, and communicative abilities of the evaluator in assessing the level of competence of the speaker.

Is it acceptable, as instructors assess speaker competence, for different determinations to be made at different colleges and universities? In using the **Competent Speaker Form** the overriding assumption has to be the fact that these are the speaker skills a student needs to be competent. The application of the elements of the **Competent Speaker Form** is idiosyncratic -- it depends on the instructor making the judgments.

DeWitt, *et al.* (1991) suggest that "because the usefulness of assessment measures depends on qualified raters, states will need a means of determining the qualifications necessary for assessors" (150). This suggests that the raters are the determinants of competence, not the performance of the student. It also changes the definition of competence to require performing those communicative behaviors which are acceptable to a qualified, trained rater. This puts the onus on the teacher, not the audience as evaluator, to assess competence. What an untrained rater thinks (e.g., a student audience, roommate, family member) is immaterial for assessing competence. Outside the classroom, this definition of competence is neither practical nor necessary.

Cognitive Communication Competence. Duran and Spitzberg (1995), in examining cognitive competence, suggest four mental processes as central to an individual's communication competence. These mental processes are: "1) *anticipation* of situational variables that have the potential to influence one's communication behaviors, 2) perception of the *consequences* of one's communication choices, 3) *immediate reflection*, and 4) *continued reflection* upon the choices one has made" (Duran and Spitzberg, 1995, p. 262). Although an interesting area of research, the application of their Cognitive Communication Competence Scale (CCCS) is difficult in the basic communication course. For example, how does the instructor listening to a student's speech identify, much less assess, the student's

abilities to anticipate, evaluate consequences, and reflect on her or his communication? Yet, several of the competencies in the "Competent Speaker Form" suggest, if not require, the instructor to make such evaluations during the student's speech.

The different conceptualizations of competence have resulted in a conceptual quagmire which is neither enlightening nor pragmatically useful. Phillips suggests that "Defining 'competence' is like trying to climb a greased pole. Every time you think you have it, it slips" (p. 25). Rubin and Henzl (1984) argue, "Teachers and researchers alike have found the literature [on communication competence] confusing since these varying perspectives are often treated as definitive statements on competence rather than the perspectives they are" (p. 263). Defining and measuring competence first requires an analysis of the validity of the underlying perspectives. We argue that the transactional approach to communication obviates the current definitions of competence and its measurement.

Finally, little is known about how to put all of these, or for that matter any of these, depictions of communication competence to use on any given campus. Spitzberg (1983) suggested that "while our discipline begins to develop instructional objectives for communication competency, it is important that our perspective of competence be precise enough to generate research and interdisciplinary respectability, and simultaneously broad enough to integrate diverse educational

concerns" (p. 323). The utility of our depictions of communication competence must be both useful and rooted in our history. Isolating the focus on speaker skills or listener skills seemingly misses the importance of communication -- mutual or simultaneous understanding.

Action and Reaction Approaches to Communication Competence

Competence is most commonly defined from the action perspective which focuses on the performance of specific communication skills. For example, McCroskey (1982) states that many definitions of competence require performance of communication skills. "Clearly, having the ability to behave in the appropriate manner is not sufficient to be judged competent, the ability must be manifest behaviorally.. . . To be judged competent, in other words, the person must perform competent behaviors" (p. 2). The performance of skills by one person are evaluatively placed along a continuum of competence (Rosenfeld and Berko, 1990; Spitzberg, 1983). The more skillfully the message is encoded or decoded, the more competent the communicator. Competent communicators are those who can skillfully construct and deliver a message which is appropriate to the context and listener, or who can effectively listen and decipher a message. In this scenario, both communicators can be

labeled as "competent" yet the communication exchange not be competent.

Duran and Zakahi (1984) suggested that communication adaptability is influenced most by the communicator's social composure and social experience. If adaptability is central to our view of communication competence, how is it assessed given the two most critical factors: social composure and social experience? Social composure or appearing relaxed during a public speech relates directly to what we teach students in the introductory public speaking class. We tell our students the more times you give a speech, the more comfortable (composed) you will appear.

The reaction approach focuses on the perceptions of the listener who makes the ultimate judgment of competence. Competence is determined by whether or not the listener perceives the speaker to be competent. For example, Rubin (1985) states "One goal of the communication scholar is to understand how impressions about communication competence are formed, and to determine how knowledge, skill, and motivation lead to perceptions of competence in various context" (p. 173). Similarly, Pavitt and Haight (1985) suggest that competence is a template by which receivers judge the appropriateness of other people's communication behaviors.

Whether viewed as a property of the speaker or a characteristic of the listener, the action and reaction approaches lead to inappropriate and/or incomplete criteria for

evaluating competence. Focusing on only one element of the communication context in isolation provides a distorted picture of the complexities of communication. Separation of competence into either communicator's separate behaviors suggests that one person's behavior can be judged apart from another person's reaction. These approaches lead to three common, but problematic, methods for assessing competence: as skills, as goal attainment, and as appropriateness.

Competence as a Set of Communication Skills

The action approach, for example, suggests that competence can be determined by measuring the person's performance of specific effective communicative skills. Such assessment necessarily assumes that an ideal model of competent skills exists. Competence becomes a judgment of the closeness of fit between a person's behavioral performance and that ideal model of communication behavior. Rubin (1991) describes the measurement of competence as when "an individual [student] communicates while being rated on standard criteria by either a trained observer or a participant. These techniques are based on a communication skills approach to competence both theoretically and operationally" (p. 304). The difficulty is in determining an appropriate model that can be universally applied beyond the specific communicative event. Even in the public speaking classroom, criteria and level of competence change from assignment to assignment, from first speech to last, from

beginning classes to advanced. The same performance of communicative behaviors judged as competent for one assignment in one class are evaluated as less competent for another class or assignment. Behavior judged as competent in the classroom may be judged as incompetent elsewhere.

The problems here should be obvious. Competence must be viewed as more than just the application of skills. We have to view competence as a shared creation among participants; therefore skills and their application will change repeatedly during an exchange. We cannot teach that these are the skills and they will make you competent in all situations. Can we say we do avoid this temptation?

The notion that competence is context specific (Bochner and Kelly, 1974; Spitzberg, 1983) inherently implies that different behaviors are required by different contexts. Thus, assessment of competence would require an analysis of the specific context (Spitzberg, 1991; Spitzberg and Brunner, 1991). It would also assume that different ideal models would be applicable to different contexts, such that learning one model would be insufficient to create generalized competence. Rubin (1991) concludes, "we must examine the impact of the context on communication behavior" (p. 305). Hence, Morreale, et al. (1992) conclude, "Given the impracticality of developing a single instrument to assess communication competence, the focus must be on developing multiple instruments or procedures for assessing competence within specific contexts" (p. 27). Because contexts

are infinitely variable, accurate competence assessment becomes problematic; yet teachers make these assessments daily.

In discussing communication competence as skills, Rubin (1991) suggests, "The communication skills movement, because of its focus on skill enhancement through instruction, provides instructional guidelines for each of the many skills comprising competence. Some have argued that these skills are much too specific and that the whole impression is more than the sum of the parts" (p. 295). Therefore, the skills approach may actually limit our abilities to teach **and** research communication competence.

Competence as Achieving Goals

From the action approach, competence can also be viewed in terms of "effectiveness" or achievement of goals. Although goals appear inherently measurable, they are not. In many cases goals are ill-defined, nebulous constructs. Communicators cannot judge whether goals were attained because the goals are unknown. In other cases, goals change over time (Rosenfeld & Berko, 1990). The goals formulated prior to interaction are not necessarily the same goals created during the actual communication, or the goals realized during retrospective sense making. In most cases, multiple goals operate simultaneously to guide communicator behaviors. These goals include content and relationship objectives, short-term and long-term outcomes, and goals for self and others. Indeed, the communication goal may be to

intentionally confuse the other, that is, to intentionally communicate ineffectively.

When some goals are met and not others, when short-term goals are achieved while long-term goals are not (and vice versa) or when personal goals are met while others' goals are thwarted, determining the level of competence is problematic. Similarly, communication goals cannot be ascertained by simply observing communicators' behaviors. For example, many persuasive messages achieve their effects only after time has passed (the sleeper effect) or upon repetition of messages. Conversely, competence cannot be inferred simply by measuring goal attainment. Goals are often achieved due to factors totally unrelated to the communicators' efforts such as chance, historical events, other people's communication, or changes in the receiver's experiences. Defining competence as the achievement of goals provides little constructive help in determining communication competence.

Competence as Appropriateness

The reaction view suggests that competence is judged by the receiver of the message. Regardless of the intent of the speaker, or the speaker's own assessment of communication competency, the receiver ultimately determines the effectiveness of the message. Even action definitions of competence which require "adaptation to the listener" imply that the listener is the judge of speaker's ability to adapt. Just as skills are context specific, so must assessments of appropriateness. While

"Valley talk" and vocalized pauses may be abhorred in the classroom and other formal situations, they are the accepted norm and required in some contexts. Direct and frequent eye contact may be appropriate for the Westernized speech classroom, it would be counterproductive in many Oriental and Native American interactions.

While, theoretically, skill performance and goal attainment may be observable phenomena, appropriateness is inherently a judgment, an inference made from a behavior or a lack of behavior. From this perspective, competence becomes an art of rhetorical criticism rather than a empirical observation of communication behavior (Phillips, 1983). Rubin (1991) summarizes the appropriateness view of communication competence. She states, "Various communication theories see appropriateness as central to communication competence. ... Appropriate behaviors are those that others judge to be consistent with the rules of a particular society. ... Competence, then is knowledge of appropriate rules and the skill to accomplish goals while using these rules with others" (p. 297). From the reaction approach, assessment of competence changes depending on the specific person evaluating it and that person's critical, analytical abilities. Measuring competence, therefore, depends on determining which person's judgment is valid. The appropriateness criteria places competence in the receiver's skills, knowledge, and acumen rather than on the speaker's communicative ability.

A Transactional Approach to Competence

Most basic communication textbooks and communication scholars accede that communication is a transactional process, that is, communication involves the simultaneous sending and receiving of messages by all communication interactants. The transaction approach, however, is more than simultaneity of message exchange. It implies that people mutually create communication through their joint behaviors. The approach changes the focus of communication from the message (action) and subsequent feedback (reaction) to the creation of shared meaning. Meanings for extant communicative behaviors is derived from the communicators' private experiences, emotional and physiological states, and perceptual constraints as modified by the social and physical contexts. Communication, therefore, is a mutually created, non-linear, socially constructed event among interdependent interactants.

If communication is transactional then communication competence is also mutually created (Yoder, *et al.*, 1996). Competence is not a judgment about what a speaker OR a listener does in isolation, but what both people simultaneously and mutually create. For example, a good listener can compensate for a poorly constructed message or can help the other person clarify their message. Conversely, a message which meets all a priori requirements of an ideal speech may be negated by a receiver's inadequate listening skills or perceptual biases. Similarly, a

person can construct a message which overcomes listening barriers. Relational partners may implicitly understand messages which are indecipherable to anyone outside the relationship. If fact, Sellnow and Littlefield (1996) concluded, "There has been little attempt to understand the process of a speaker's adaptation from the listener's point of view. ... Hence, we advocate the need for basic course instructors/scholars to reconsider audience analysis as it addresses cultural diversity from speakers and listeners jointly engaged in a communication transaction" (pp. 158-159).

In each of these cases, mutual understanding was created but it is impossible to assess that one person alone is a competent communicator. Rather, the assessment must be on whether the communication is more or less competent. If people develop mutual agreement on the meaning of their communication, the communication was competent regardless of the adequacy of the individual communicators' skills. If people cannot or do not create shared meaning, then it seems contradictory to suggest either was a competent communicator.

Implications for the Basic Communication Course

We have argued that most definitions and measurements of communication competence are based on the action or reaction approaches to communication. Assessing the adequacy of

communication behaviors apart from the context and relationship of the participants is at best arbitrary and inherently biased. Determining an ideal model by which to compare individuals' performances of communication skills is counterproductive since no model can generalize to all communication contexts and development of models for each context becomes infinitely complex. Measuring goal achievement as an indicator of competent communication requires an unwarranted assumption that goals can be reliably and validly defined and that a person's communication behavior was a sufficient and necessary cause of the actual outcome. Yet measuring instruments based on the action and reaction approaches continue to be developed.

Indeed, communication competence may not even be observable to an outside viewer. One reason for this is that judgments about communication competence (from the transactional approach) are dependent upon the shared histories **and** the relationship of the communicators. For an outside observer to judge communication competence in a long term relationship would be as difficult for someone to assess communication competence in a newly-formed relationship. In addition, participants may alter their judgments of communication competence over time. That is, with additional information about their communication, participants may retroactively adjust their judgments of competence from a particular situation.

The Competent Speaker Form

Morreale, *et al*. (1992) state, "**The Competent Speaker** speech evaluation form is an assessment instrument designed to evaluate/rate observable public speaking skills/behaviors of college students. ... The instrument can be used to evaluate skills/behaviors as opposed to knowledge or motivation. It assesses both verbal and nonverbal behavior and remote preparation skills" (p. 3). As early as 1982, Backlund, *et. al*. defined five areas of assessment of speaking skills. The areas of assessment include: 1) naturalistic settings, 2) observations in the class by teachers, 3) delivery, language, organization, and purpose should be part of the evaluation, 4) the reliability of the instrument, and 5) the validity of the instrument (Backlund, *et al*., 1982). Carlson and Smith-Howell (1995) reiterate the importance of the reliability and validity of the assessment (evaluation) instrument. It is unfortunate that Carlson and Smith-Howell (1995) did not select the "Competent Speaker Form" as one of the three forms they used in their study. The **Competent Speaker Form** seems to be an expansion and direct application of these five areas. The **Competent Speaker Form** consists of eight competencies, four related to delivery and four related to speech preparation.

The eight competencies identified are (Morreale, *et al*., 1992, pp. 8-15; Morreale, 1994, pp. 225-228):

COMPETENCY 1: Chooses and Narrows a Topic Appropriately for the Audience and Occasion.

COMPETENCY 2: Communicates the Thesis or Specific Purpose in a Manner Appropriate for the Audience and Occasion.

COMPETENCY 3: Provides Supporting Material Appropriate to the Audience and Occasion.

COMPETENCY 4: Uses an Organizational Pattern Appropriate to the Topic, Audience, Occasion, and Purpose.

COMPETENCY 5: Uses Language Appropriate to the Audience and Occasion.

COMPETENCY 6: Uses Vocal Variety in Rate, Pitch, and Intensity (Volume) to Heighten and Maintain Interest Appropriate to the Audience and Occasion.

COMPETENCY 7: Uses Pronunciation, Grammar, and Articulation Appropriate to the Audience and Occasion.

COMPETENCY 8: Uses Physical Behaviors That Support the Verbal Message.

Criticism of the Form

We have three general criticisms of **The Competent Speaker** evaluation form. These include:

(1) the ability to discriminate the levels of competence,

(2) the generalizations from the teacher's point of view to the audience as a whole,

(3) the cultural narrowness of the competencies.

The Ability to Discriminate the Levels of Competence.

First, the discriminations needed to determine "excellent," "satisfactory," and "unsatisfactory" levels of competence are not clearly defined or adequately defended. Although Morreale (1994) offered explanations of these discriminators, they are not clear enough to point an evaluator into clear distinctions between "excellence" and "satisfactory" (pp. 225-228). These discriminations call for subjective judgments of quality of "ideal" behaviors as opposed to relational dimensions which impact understanding and the degree of communication competence achieved. The differences between these gradations are vague and not universally accepted. For example, Morreale, *et al.* (1992) suggest it is important a speaker demonstrate "insightful audience analysis" (p. 8). There are no universal standards for appropriateness, much less "exceptional" appropriateness. In **Competency 1**, the distinction between "exceptionally appropriate for the purpose, time constraints, and audience" and simply "appropriate for the purpose, time constraints, and audience" (Morreale, 1994, p. 225) is not clearly defined. If the speaker misses one of these objectives in **Competency 1**, how is her or his competence assessed? In the explanation of an "unsatisfactory" evaluation, Morreale (1994) suggested, "That is, the speaker's

choice of topic is inconsistent with the purpose, the topic cannot be adequately treated in the time limitations of the speech, and there is little or no evidence of successful audience analysis" (p. 225). The reader concludes that to evaluate a student with an unsatisfactory in **Competency 1**, they must miss *all three of these criteria*.

In **Competency 3**, Morreale, *et al.* (1992) expect speakers to use "supporting material that is exceptional in quality and variety" (p. 10). There are recognized difficulties in determining the differences between "exceptional quality" and "quality" sources as well as "exceptional variety" and "variety." Unless we are willing and able to designate what exceptional quality sources are and what exceptional variety means, this competency will be difficult to apply in any communication situation.

In **Competency 5**, there is an important distinction to be made regarding language usage. This distinction calls for the rater to evaluate the subtle differences between "exceptionally clear" and "reasonably clear" (Morreale, 1994, p. 226). These fine distinctions are consistent through each of the eight competencies offered. Perhaps what is actually needed is two-levels of evaluation: "satisfactory" and "unsatisfactory." In this kind of assessment system, the rater is asked to make judgments about minimum levels of public speaking competence. Adding a third level ("excellent") compounds the all-important issue of whether a students has achieved a specific competency or

not and calls on the rater to make too fine a distinction in assessing any speaker's competence.

The Generalizations From the Teacher's Point of View to the Audience as a Whole. The competencies from the form are based on generalizations from the teacher's point of view to the audience as a whole. There are problems with these generalizations. Judgments about a student's competence are made simply from the teacher's point of view ***and not the audience's***, as the authors suggest. This leap to criteria application is diametrically opposed to the transactional view of communication competence. In the transactional view of competence, each relationship between speaker and member of the audience is important. Competence will be determined by the understanding developed between the speaker and each listener. In assessing skills for appropriateness to audience and occasion, it is difficult to know if the skills are "appropriate" to each member of the audience. It is difficult to believe that we, as communication educators, want to place ourselves in the position of determining for an audience, whether in a classroom of 20 students or for an audience of 200, 2000, or 20000 people that a speaker is competent -- a reactional view of communication competence. Pearson and Daniels (1988) point out the difficulty of attempting to map out behavioral repertoires as part of any assessment of communication competence.

An associated problem with the instructor acting as "universal audience" leads to a discussion of culture and

cultural diversity in public speaking instruction. Sellnow and Littlefield (1996) concluded,

> Generally, those instructors who resist the introduction of cultural diversity in the basic course lack a clear understanding of what cultural diversity means and how it can be integrated into the basic course to benefit the students' training. As a result, they focus on the demographic characteristics that are most familiar to them: age, sex, education level, economic status, and other accepted categories. Some resist the introduction of cultural diversity on the grounds that it has the potential to force students to talk about topics that might be unfamiliar to them. (pp. 161-162)

The "Competent Speaker Form" allows the instructor to be the sole judge of competence, with her or his biases towards diversity and/or topic exerting its influence.

The Cultural Narrowness of the Competencies. Third, these competencies are culturally narrow. Morreale, *et al.* (1992) claim, "Each competency is assessed with respect to appropriateness for the audience and the occasion; thus cultural and other biases are avoided" (p. 3). Morreale (1994) offered the same conclusion in her essay on assessment of public speaking (p. 221). However, there are cultural issues remaining when the competencies are applied in a specific communication situation. Morreale (1994) offered little explanation other than the claim that "No significant difference in scores, by ethnic group

(African-American, Anglo-American, Asian-American, Hispanic-American, or Native-American) or by gender, were found" (p. 223). The question remains, how does a speaker adapt to a diverse audience -- made up in combination of African-Americans, Anglo-Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and Native-Americans? These are the kinds of audiences our students now face in many college and university classrooms. Another example, **Competency 2** calls for the speaker to communicate "a thesis or specific purpose that is exceptionally clear and identifiable" (Morreale *et al.*, 1992, p. 9). This is a culturally biased, Western model of speech development. Stiggins, *et al.* (1985) warns us about the bias inherent in establishing measures to assess communication skills. They call for unobtrusive observations of the communication skill performance. Goulden (1996) reiterates the problems in the area of cultural communication and bias in writing, "Part of the difficulty in adapting public speaking instruction to a variety of cultural needs is the typical skills approach that prescribes uniform process steps and performance expectations" (p. 125).

Our biases to a Western model of speech development are clear with the notion that a thesis must come in the beginning of the speech. Among other issues, this approach does **not** account for the use of the Motivated Sequence (where the speaker's specific purpose is revealed after the Need Step) or climactic or unfolding speech organization patterns. Another example is evident in **Competency 7**, which calls for "exceptional

articulation, pronunciation, and grammar" (Morreale, *et al.*, 1992, p. 14). The problem with this competency is clear. Obvious problems arise for English-as-a-Second Language students. These students have different articulation, pronunciation, and grammar practices. If we apply our Western (American) rules to these students' speeches, they will have difficulties meeting the standards for exceptional performance in these three categories from **The Competent Speaker** form. Oludaja and Honken (1996) suggested "instructors should listen *patiently*, fighting the temptation to be sidetracked or frustrated by a student's accent or pronunciation, and listening with their ears, their eyes, and their hearts. They should listen carefully to the words while remembering that some languages do not have the intonation and stress patterns that English has" (p. 142). The problems with this competency are not only intercultural in nature, there are problems within communication classes at U.S. colleges and universities, too. For example, does a person with a Southern or New York accent have to change if talking to a Midwestern audience? Does a person with a Midwestern accent have to change when talking to a Southern audience?

Finally, in **Competency 8**, which calls for speakers to use "exceptional posture, gestures, bodily movements, facial expressions, eye contact, and use of dress" (Morreale, *et al.*, 1992, p. 15). In some cultures, eye contact is inappropriate. Gudykunst and Hammer (1984) and Wiseman, *et al.* (1989) warn us from being too culture-specific in our views of communication

competence or communication effectiveness. For example, in some cultures common American gestures are perceived as offensive. There are many different views of appropriate dress (Molloy, 1975 & 1977).

Conclusion

The transactional approach to communication competence requires that our discipline escape from the pedagogical trap of professing to teach people to be competent communicators. At best, we can teach a few specific communication skills. We can demonstrate students' abilities to perform these skills, and we can demonstrate improvement in their performance as a result of a basic communication course. We cannot, and should not, claim that we have created competent or incompetent communicators. The skills and knowledge taught in the basic course do not guarantee goal attainment nor are they necessarily applicable to non-classroom cultures and situations. In labeling a student "a competent communicator," we are suggesting that the competencies transcend the immediate context of the classroom speech; labeling the person as competent, when we are actually only judging some specific speaking skills as competent. There is no evidence to suggest that this is the case. Hence, there is a difference between a ***"Competent Speaker Form"*** and a ***"Competence Speaking Skills Form."***

Indeed, many of the skills taught in the basic course are inapplicable, inappropriate, and even unnecessary to many relationships and contexts. "Accommodating different points of view, different ways of thinking, and different ways of communicating goes counter to the way we traditionally teach the basic course. For the most part, we expect students to become "Westernized" in their thinking and in their communication performances" (Hugenberg, 1996, p. 111). The fact remains that many of our communication transactions with others are not, and will not be, "Westernized." Communication educators are doing very little to help students prepare for these kinds of situations. The **Competent Speaker Form** takes student communication skill development (competence) in the wrong direction.

The basic course barely scratches the surface of the knowledge necessary to understand the intricacies of human communication. By necessity, the basic course can examine only a minute number of contexts and situations. Evaluation of students' communication abilities are based on a few minutes of observation as they perform arbitrary assignments in an artificial environment. That is very little on which to base an assessment that the student is a competent communicator.

What we can, and should, profess to teach is a knowledge base which can help students make informed analysis and judgments about their past, present, and future communication interactions. We can, and should, teach skills that students can use in a

variety of communication contexts. We can, and should, discuss and demonstrate communication strategies that might be helpful in future interactions. In essence, the basic course can, and should, create an awareness of the processes of communication and development of a repertoire of communication skills and strategies that increase the students' chances of creating competent communication with others.

Communication competence is a judgment made by the participants in a specific communication transaction. It is neither a characteristic of an individual communicator nor a simple aggregate of observable communication behaviors. To label a student as a competent or incompetent communicator is a misrepresentation of the tenets of transactional communication. The basic communication course should focus on increasing students' proficiency in communication skills, improving students' ability to make informed analyses of communication situations, and enhancing students' capability to adapt to diverse communication contexts. Let's get out of the business of proclaiming a student as competent or incompetent based on a few weeks of lessons and a limited number of performances in an artificial environment.

We believe there is a need to question our assumptions about how to teach communication and assess communication competence in the classroom. Artificial criteria included in evaluation forms used in courses to assess students' communication performances fail to reflect what we know about communication as a transaction

and what we know about communication competence.

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